



# Exploring Tenant Involvement in Governance of Low-Income Housing

Final Report



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This project was conducted under the mentorship of City staff. The opinions and recommendations in this report, and any errors, are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the City of Vancouver or The University of British Columbia.

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All of the work done for this project was conducted on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔt (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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- Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC)
- Lookout Housing and Health Society
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## Cover Photo:

*Hastings Strip*

Photo by Dan Toulgoet, 2021.

<https://biv.com/article/2021/05/investigation-who-owns-vancouvers-downtown-eastside>

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Project Overview

The topic of tenant governance has persisted in low-income housing settings around the world as tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments have worked to reshape these housing governance systems. Governance refers to the policies, programs, or committees with decision-making powers in a housing setting. These efforts to reshape housing governance have resulted in a range of lessons and innovations that other tenants and housing providers can learn from. This report provides a review of some of these governance lessons and initiatives to act as a guiding resource for communities working towards increasing tenant governance in low-income housing.

## Methodology

This project involved a review of relevant literature and a series of interviews with community stakeholders. In the end, fourteen semi-structured interviews were held with a range of stakeholders representing tenant advocacy groups, housing researchers, non-profit housing operators, and civic non-market housing planning and operations staff. The notes from these meetings were coded to identify relevant themes that would be contrasted with the findings from the Literature Review. In the end, a list of recommendations was created to highlight funding, research, and policy opportunities to support future tenant governance projects.

## Key Findings

The following key findings were identified from the combined literature review and engagement process with community stakeholders:

1. Opportunities for increasing tenant involvement in housing governance fall along a continuum where tenants can be participants, partners, and controllers in housing governance.
2. Increased tenant involvement in housing governance can lead to a range of health and social benefits for tenants and housing providers.
3. A willingness to change, transparency, and partnerships are three crucial components for tenants and housing providers working to increase tenant involvement in housing governance.
4. There is great interest and support for tenant governance among tenants, advocates, and housing providers. However there is often a disparity in what tenants and housing providers want and are working towards. Communication and negotiations play an important role in this process.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Recommendations

A series of recommendations were created to support tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments in deciding on next steps for increasing tenant governance in low-income housing. These recommendations fall along the three different levels of the Tenant Governance Continuum: Participation, Partnership, and Control. These recommendations include:

- Collecting tenant feedback on a large scale to identify shared tenant experiences and to provide direction for a housing provider's response.
- Housing providers completing internal assessments of their existing governance structures.
- A formal review of the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) to create stronger protections for tenants and support tenant governance initiatives.
- Additional research to help tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments expand their understanding of tenant governance and create plans for implementing change.
- Seeking support from a third-party advocate to help facilitate tenant negotiations on an individual and collective scale.
- Creating space for tenants, housing providers, and other interested parties to gather for exchanging information and mutual learning.
- Creating tenant-led committees or encouraging tenant involvement on governing boards.
- Further research into housing models that utilize alternative governance systems for housing providers to consider.
- Seeking out grants or other funding opportunities that can initiate potential tenant governance projects.
- Funding opportunities developed by civic entities or housing providers that encourage tenant-led initiatives around tenant governance.
- Separating tenant governance from the governing body that collects rent or has the power to evict tenants.

# INTRODUCTION

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The topic of tenant involvement in housing governance has been a long-standing point of discussion for tenants, housing providers, and their broader communities. As housing providers have worked to deliver quality services to their tenants, they have established systems of governance such as building policies, programs, or various committees with decision-making powers. These systems of governance aim to ensure tenant satisfaction and safety, organizational stability, and long-term financial sustainability. However, many tenants who reside in these governance systems have continued to express their dissatisfaction with them and find that these systems actively exclude the needs and voices of tenants. This is especially true for low-income tenants residing in the often-limited supply of private and non-market housing. Having fewer options for affordable housing further restricts the agency that tenants have in deciding where to live. In a direct response to this, low-income tenants and community advocates have organized in various ways to meet their own needs. These organized efforts do not only involve tenants and housing providers but extend to other community members or stakeholders who may also play a supporting role. This can include neighbours, municipalities, advocates, organizations and political leaders. The result of these collaborative efforts is a range of frameworks and programs that tenants and housing providers have created to increase tenant autonomy and involvement within their housing governance structures. This report provides an overview of some of these lessons and initiatives for tenant governance to act as a guiding resource for communities working towards increasing tenant governance in low-income housing.

This project was completed by a graduate student from the University of British Columbia (UBC) as part of the Healthy City Scholars program. This program is a partnership between UBC and the City of Vancouver (CoV) that connects student researchers to projects focused on advancing the various goals from Vancouver's Healthy City Strategy (HCS) (City of Vancouver, 2014). Some of the goals and targets from the HCS that this project aligns with include:

- **Being and Feeling Safe and Included:** Increase Vancouver residents' sense of belonging and safety by 10%.
- **Cultivating Connections:** All Vancouverites report that they have at least 4 people in their network they can rely on for support in times of need.
- **Expressing Ourselves:** Increase public participation and community engagement in arts and culture by 25% over 2014 levels.

This project was completed specifically with the City of Vancouver's Supportive Housing & SROs team in the Arts, Culture & Community Services (ACCS) department.

# INTRODUCTION

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This report involved a series of interviews with civic and non-profit housing providers, tenant advocates, researchers, and other community stakeholders who have experience or interest in this topic of tenant governance. The goal of this project was to better understand local and global efforts led by tenants and housing providers that have helped form alternative housing governance models in the past and present. This report seeks to demonstrate how alternative models of housing governance could be initiated and supported by tenants, housing providers, and other community partners in the City of Vancouver.

The research for this report was conducted during the summer months of 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This event has placed increased pressure on communities around the globe as they have responded to the many health, social, economic, and cultural impacts of this pandemic. As urban tenants have been advised to shelter-in-place and take increased safety measures, this has brought more attention to the harsh living conditions that many have been living in for years. It is important to acknowledge this context from the outset of this report, and to recognize that communities will continue to feel the effects of the pandemic for years to come.

This report touches on reshaping power imbalances in low-income rental housing. While this is necessary for tenants and housing providers to explore, it is important to consider that efforts to address power dynamics within low-income housing environments still operate within a binary framework of power, which is attributed to the legacy of European colonial structures. This binary creates distinctions for who holds power and who does not; positioning groups against each other. This report will speak to the ways that tenants and housing providers have worked to shift power within colonialist housing structures, however it is important to acknowledge the body of work being done outside of these colonialist power structures to de-colonizing them entirely. De-colonial practices have informed findings in this report. However, decolonized approaches to governance was beyond the scope of this project, and therefore will not be a central theme of this report.

# METHODOLOGY

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A series of stakeholder interviews were conducted over the course of the project, with the goal of seeking out community members with subject matter expertise or experience in the topic of tenant involvement in housing governance. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were held with a range of community stakeholders representing tenant advocacy groups, housing researchers, non-profit housing operators, civic non-market housing planning and operations staff. As there is no set definition for this topic, each interviewee approached the topic of tenant governance differently, resulting in a range of ideas and responses. It is also important to note that the views expressed in each interview do not represent the views of all housing providers, tenant advocacy groups, or municipalities, but serves as an example of the common rhetoric among many of these groups around this topic.

One of the main limitations for this report is the lack of input from persons with lived experience in low-income housing. Due to ethical concerns and the logistical constraints of this project, this direct input was unable to be a part of this study. Indirect input was included via the low-income tenant advocates and organizations interviewed as part of the research. One other limitation of the report was a lack of input from private housing providers of market-rate housing units. Several private housing providers were contacted to take part in this study but none of those contacted had accepted.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions in place over the course of the project, the interviews took place over a range of video or audio calling platforms. Meeting notes were taken in each of these interviews, however no names or direct quotes have been used in this report due to the sensitive nature of these conversations. The notes from these meetings were used to identify themes. The key findings that came out of these discussions are highlighted and discussed in the Review of Stakeholder Engagement section of this report.

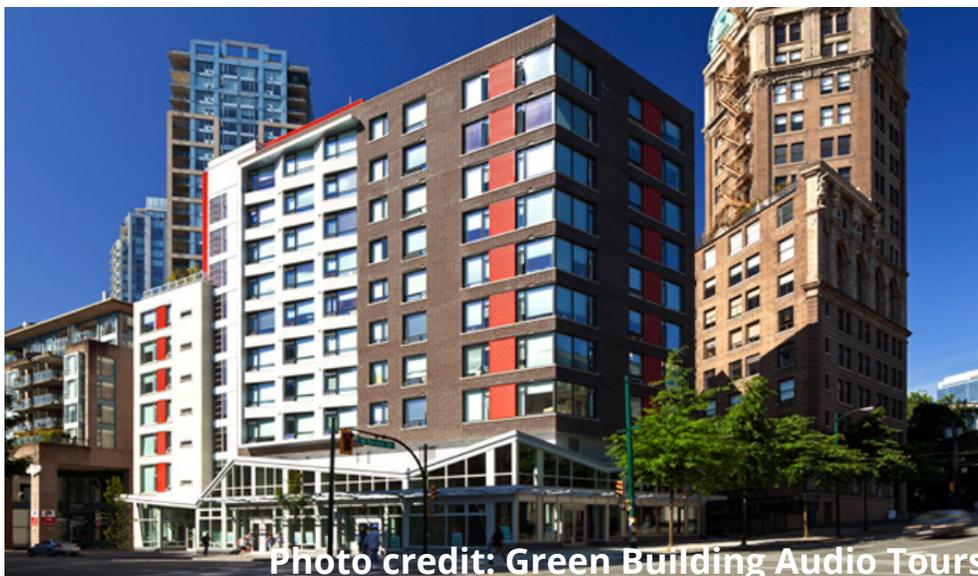


Photo credit: Green Building Audio Tours

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Project Background

Tenants have raised concerns about their lack of involvement in housing governance for many years. Literature reviewed for this project cites recorded efforts by tenants raising their concerns dating back to the 1950s-1960s. Around this time there was a significant rise in tenants' associations in the UK that were largely influenced by the labour movements of the time (Cairncross et al., 1997). A key component of these movements was that they were largely born out of criticism of welfare state agencies, who have long been seen as being restrictive and undemocratic. Tenant governance is understood as a reaction to “paternalistic, bureaucratic, and hierarchical local authority landlords” in the housing sector (Preece, 2019).

In many cases, progression in the work around tenant governance in low-income housing has been born out of tragedy. Tenants around the world have had to repeatedly respond to unsafe living conditions, dilapidating buildings, stringent organizational policies, and discriminatory or negligent property owners. Events such as the 2017 fire in the Grenfell Tower residential flats in London shocked the world when it resulted in 72 tenant deaths. As a social housing building, the Grenfell Tower primarily housed low-income tenants. It eventually came to light that this fire occurred due to a number of building maintenance needs that had been neglected by the property's owner; even after tenants had repeatedly raised these concerns. The public outrage in response to this disaster sparked large-scale reviews of social housing in the UK (Preece, 2019; TAROE Trust, 2018). Tenants themselves have organized and advocated to prevent further peril. For example, tenants in the UK are currently working to raise awareness of the flammable building materials that contributed to the spread of the Grenfell Tower fire that are still found on many other low-income housing buildings in the UK (Corker, 2021). These examples display some of the threats that low-income tenants face when their concerns and needs are not heard, and demonstrate the organizing efforts required to ensure these threats do not continue.

The scope of this report focuses on tenants in low-income housing, a broad term used to refer to tenants living in a mix of market and non-market affordable housing units (City of Vancouver, 2020). This includes private Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, located in privately owned and non-profit owned or operated buildings, as well as non-market housing, which refers to buildings that are government-owned. Overall, this report will mainly speak to tenants, tenant advocates, and non-profit, private, and civic housing providers in the City of Vancouver.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Project Background

As outlined in the Healthy City Strategy (HCS), the City of Vancouver recognizes the impact that physical and social environments have on the health of its residents (City of Vancouver, 2014). Therefore, the way that affordable housing services operate has a direct impact on the collective health of its tenants. As the City works to improve and expand the portfolio of affordable housing units in Vancouver, they are focusing on the HCS goals alongside this to ensure that all Vancouver residents are living in safe, inclusive, and connected social environments.

The City of Vancouver's Housing Vancouver Strategy (HVS) explains that "housing is considered to be affordable when it comprises 30% or less of a household's total income before taxes" (City of Vancouver, 2017). Therefore, any tenant spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs is considered to be "housing cost burdened". The HVS further explains that lack of housing affordability is particularly relevant for low- and moderate-income households, whose housing costs are more likely to be higher in proportion to their income. It is difficult to define "low-income" households since affordability depends on the housing provider, housing setting, total household income, family size, and additional factors (City of Vancouver, 2020). For the purpose of this report, "low-income tenants" has been defined as households with an annual income of \$30,000 CAD/year or less. This definition accounts for the two lowest income bands outlined in the HVS: households making less than \$15,000 CAD annually, and households making \$15,000-\$30,000 CAD annually. These income bands represent tenants at the lower end of the housing continuum, who often reside in low-income housing such as privately owned SROs, social, or supportive housing.

This literature review was informed by documents from tenant organizing groups, civic and non-profit reports, academic literature, newspaper articles, and other grey literature on this topic. This literature review provided an overview of work that has been done by tenants, housing providers, and municipalities around this topic.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## What is Tenant Governance?

As much as tenant governance in housing has been discussed, researched, and practiced, there is not one single way to approach tenant governance. Approaches differ based on the context of the housing setting, tenant demographics, geography, among countless other factors. Another important detail is that there is a range of terminology on this subject. Much of the literature reviewed for this report used similar terms such as “Tenant Engagement” (Mullins & Shanks, 2017; McCollum, 2008), “Tenant Participation” (Pawson & Munro, 2010; Bengtsson, 1998), and “Resident Democracy” (Hansen & Langergaard, 2017). While these terms are not interchangeable, they do share the common goal of including tenant voices in decision-making structures for housing operations. Tenant governance combines these previously established ideas of tenant engagement, tenant participation, and resident democracy and then expands on them in exploring new ways to work towards tenant empowerment.

Borrowing from this knowledge, this report will use the following definition for tenant governance:

*[T]enants taking part in decision making processes and influencing decisions about housing policies; housing conditions; and housing (and related) services. It is a two way process which involves the sharing of information, ideas and power (Scottish Office, 1999; as quoted in Pawson et al., 2012).*

This definition was chosen because it offers a goal for tenants, tenant advocates, housing providers, and government to work towards in their efforts to increase tenant governance. This definition addresses the need to increase tenant influence on decisions that will ultimately affect tenants the most. This definition also acknowledges the underlying power dynamic that exists within tenant-landlord relationships, which is crucial in understanding opportunities for restructuring governance systems.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Ideas for Further Understanding

One way that people have come to understand tenant governance is through the framework of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 2019). This framework (Figure 1) outlines eight levels of citizen participation and decision-making. As one moves up the ladder, the levels of participation increase and culminate into full Citizen Control. This framework is helpful in conversations around community empowerment because it questions the degree of power that various members have within different systems. It explores whether people have control to truly change and influence their environment, or if their involvement is more for display that ultimately benefits someone else. As tenants, tenant advocates, housing providers, and municipalities explore approaches to meaningfully increase tenant governance in housing, this tool can help to better understand the roles that each group may play, while identifying long-term goals and the steps needed to get there.

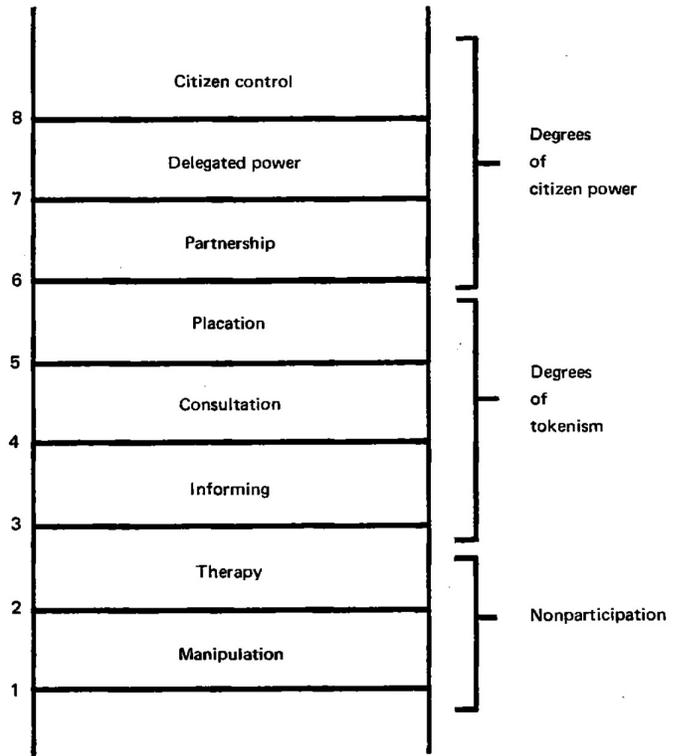


Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation



Photo credit: Lani Brunn

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Ideas for Further Understanding

In their research on tenant participation in housing, Cairncross et al (1997) identified three prominent governance models that housing providers may employ, as well as how these models impact tenants: the Traditional Model, the Consumerist Model, and the Citizenship Model (Table 1).

	Traditionalism	Consumerism	Citizenship
Primary Focus	Focus on producers, i.e. housing managers and councillors	Focus on role of consumer	Focus on consumer and citizen
View of Tenants	Focus on needs of tenants as a whole	Focus on individual tenant	Focus on tenants as individuals and as a collective
Information Flows	Paternalism and authoritarianism	Market research	Dialogue
	Reliance on political and professional judgements  Information transmitted through professional and formal, political, channels. I.e. Ballot	Advertising	Two-way information flow through many channels
Issue Focus	Focus on general issues relating to tenants as a whole	Focus on issues directly relevant to individual tenant	Focus on individual and collective issues

Table 1. Cairncross et al. 1997, Models for Housing Authority

The Traditional Model is built around the idea of representative democracy, in which the housing provider functions as the main channel for information and governance over all tenants. In this model, housing providers may be reluctant to sharing their power because they see it as their main duty to maintain it. The Consumerist Model brings a slightly different approach, whereby housing is viewed as a service, and tenants as the consumers. Thus, any effort to engage with the consumers and improve service provision would be motivated by a bottom-line of profit. Finally, the Citizenship Model aims to address tenants as citizens who are part of a larger collective. As citizens, tenants have rights to information from their housing providers, and both parties are obliged to participate in collective action to solve certain issues.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Ideas for Further Understanding

It is important to acknowledge that the Traditional, Consumerism and Citizenship Models are not always distinct and can appear in different combinations. Even housing providers with a stronger orientation towards one of the three models may not always share the underlying values of that model. This demonstrates the diversity present in approaches to tenant governance structures. While each housing provider may employ their own unique approach, these three general categories of tenant governance models offer insight into the general approaches and motivations that housing providers may bring to their roles.

There is also a profound complexity in conversations surrounding tenant governance amongst tenants. Bengtsson (1998) outlines some of the theoretical questions and tensions that may arise when tenants and advocates are organizing for collective action. For instance, some tenants may be motivated to solve conflicts with their housing provider or other tenants in the building, while others may be seeking to improve their living conditions through changes to building policies. With differing tenant needs and motivations, knowing which actions to prioritize within a group of tenants at any given time may prove difficult.

Collective action may look different based on a tenant's availability, level of commitment, comfort level, and underlying goals of the collective group. Bengtsson notes that "the conditions of co-operation may differ between different forms of collective action, e.g. between collective consumption, collective work, and collective decision-making" (1998. Pg. 100). Not all tenants will have the same level of capacity or interest in involvement. Tenant involvement could include signing petitions, canvassing, or even organizing rent strikes. None of this is meant to discourage individuals from working towards tenant governance, but it is important to understand the capacity of any group when organizing. For tenants trying to build coalitions in their housing settings, Bengtsson recommends implementing a range of opportunities for tenants to be involved to make this work more accessible to everyone.

This work towards tenant governance would not be happening if not for the tenants who have imagined new ways to be involved with the systems that govern their housing environment. Despite the many challenges that can arise in efforts for increasing tenant governance, tenants and housing providers around the world have still managed to design new ways of living and have worked hard to bring these ideas to fruition. Cornwall (2004) suggests that to understand the potential for agency in a space, the roles that have been constructed must first be examined and then reconstructed. By re-examining the roles of tenants, advocates, housing providers, and municipalities, these groups can work together change the rules around housing to try and build new and healthier communities.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Reasons for Tenant Governance

Tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments who may be considering opportunities for increasing tenant governance in housing can look to a wide range of reasons to support these efforts. A 2014 study from the Tenants Leading Change group in England concluded that tenant involvement in housing governance can bring a range of health, social, and financial benefits to all parties involved (Bliss et al., 2015; as quoted in Mullins & Shanks, 2017). This section will explore some of the potential benefits that have been identified.

For tenants, involvement in housing governance can create a sense of ownership over their lived environment. This can lead to tenants taking on greater responsibilities in caring for their home and its wider surroundings. Housing units or buildings may incur fewer damages and see increased cleanliness as a result, which would reduce cleaning and repair costs for the housing provider. Another benefit is the potential for building stronger relationships and increasing connectivity between tenants and their wider community. Increased social connections has direct mental and physical health benefits, and can contribute to a thriving social environment. Positive interpersonal relationships can increase personal satisfaction, fight loneliness, contribute to healthier lifestyles, and increase the social resilience of a community.

Ameliorating the living conditions of tenants in low-income housing through tenant governance has the potential to serve different marginalized populations as well. The Housing Vancouver Strategy identifies how Vancouver's housing crisis impacts specific groups at disproportionate rates. Lone-parent mothers are more likely to have low-incomes and face less stable housing conditions than dual-parent households. Indigenous people living in Metro Vancouver are more likely to have a lower average income on average and are more likely to experience homelessness. People who use substances face severe health, social, and legal risks in light of prohibitive laws around illegal substances. Sex workers face similar threats as well as social stigma and a lack of protective rights in their line of work. In order to support these populations, it is crucial to recognize the intersectional nature of the social issues they are facing (Cho, Williams, Krenshaw & McCall, 2013). Many low-income tenants not only experience the pressures of poverty and finding stable housing, but also face pressures and discrimination around race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, ability, and language. Discrimination and stigma also create additional barriers to accessing safe, secure, and affordable housing. Therefore, efforts to restore autonomy and power to low-income tenants through tenant governance can help to support many marginalized groups.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Reasons for Tenant Governance

Depending on the type of efforts taking place, tenant governance can also teach valuable skills to tenants. This may include skills such as community organizing, committee operations, capacity development, negotiating, long-term project management, and budgeting (McCollum, 2008). Another benefit is that tenant groups who have more involvement in their own governance are more likely to know and attend to the needs of other marginalized tenants. People with more specific needs related to varying abilities, mental health, and substance use for example, are often overlooked in non-participatory traditional governance systems. Therefore, with increased options for participation, marginalized members are more likely to be represented and cared for. Tenant governance is also seen as a route towards decentralising power in governance. This has the potential to avoid dominance by any one group, and bring about a more equitable democracy for all.

Non-profit, civic, or private housing providers can benefit from increased tenant involvement. Housing providers who work towards involving their tenants in governance, through direct leadership or in partnership with tenants, may develop stronger relationships, community support, and a positive reputation amongst tenants and the surrounding community. Drawing from the Consumerist Model for housing outlined by Cairncross et al. (1997), tenant governance can also be a way for housing providers to improve services within their housing stock. If housing providers create more channels for communication to and from tenants with the purpose of bettering services, and commit to acting on them, they will inevitably be improving the quality of their housing (Preece, 2019). There is also evidence that increased tenant satisfaction from improved services will lead to less tenant turnover, which will save additional costs for the housing provider.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## What Can Tenant Governance Involve?

One of the most common approaches to increasing tenant involvement in governance is creating space for tenants to be involved with governing boards or committees. While this approach is still very much part of the conversation, tenant governance goes further by outlining other ways for tenants to increase participation and decision-making in their housing. Research for this report has identified a range of initiatives to better involve tenants in housing governance. To better understand some of these tenant governance initiatives, this report created a model called the Tenant Governance Continuum (Table 2). The Tenant Governance Continuum places these initiatives into three main levels along a continuum of increasing tenant involvement: Participation, Partnership, and Control. This is not meant to serve as a prescriptive list, but as a set of ideas to inspire thought and consideration for tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments.

This continuum is largely inspired by Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 2019) and the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation (IAP2, 2021). Both of these models display how an individual or groups roles can change as they move through increasing levels of involvement within any system. The IAP2's Spectrum for Public Participation is a guide for organizations who want to build towards public empowerment through participatory practices. Similarly, the Tenant Governance Continuum demonstrates how a series of initiatives can lead to greater tenant control in housing governance.



# THE TENANT GOVERNANCE CONTINUUM

**Table 2. The Tenant Governance Continuum** is based off of ideas that emerged during the literature review and stakeholder engagement portions of this project. This Continuum is meant to demonstrate the range of opportunities that tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments can employ to increase tenant governance in housing. Each of these opportunities falls along an increasing spectrum of control, and ends in tenants having full control over their housing environment.

## Participation

## Partnership

## Control

### Satisfaction Surveys

Regular surveys designed to collect data on the level of satisfaction with various building operations.

### Tenant Focus Groups

A group of tenants selected to provide feedback on a specific topic or organizational decision, with the intention that this will influence the housing provider's decision.

### Community Meetings

Regular town-hall style meetings with the property owner and/or housing provider to raise questions and allow for tenant feedback.

### Tenant involvement on Boards and Committees

Seats set aside for tenants to join organizational boards, building committees, etc. These seats can be filled through elections, selections, or volunteering.

### Community Advisory Committees (CACs) or Tenant Panels

Groups of tenants, and sometimes including community members, formed to advise various building operations. Such as service review, budget decisions, managing complaints, etc.

### Tenant Consultation Requirements

Building in policies that requires housing providers to consult with tenants before making certain decisions.

### Peer Support Workers

Designated positions (paid or unpaid) where tenants act as a liaison for other tenants.

### Tenant Unions

Tenant-run groups that operate separate from any housing provider and provide education and political support to tenant members.

### Tenant Committees/Associations

Tenant-run groups that have decision-making power over governance policies for a housing provider.

### Tenant Budgets

Specific budgets created or given to tenant committees to be used without input from the housing provider.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## What Can Tenant Governance Involve?

**Participation** refers to groups or events that allow tenants to provide feedback on their housing governance structure. Depending on the type of housing, this can include tenant satisfaction surveys, focus groups, or community meetings. In each of these examples, tenants can share their ideas or experiences regarding housing operations, community plans, or policies that affect their housing with the housing provider. The main distinction in this category is that all of these initiatives are led by the housing provider, so there is no guarantee that the tenant's input will influence future actions or decisions carried out by the housing provider. In these scenarios, tenants are only participants and housing providers continue to hold their power.

**Partnership** refers to groups or events that allow tenants to work with their housing provider around certain governance structures. This can include tenant involvement on boards and committees, community advisory committees, tenant panels, peer support workers, or even policies that require housing providers to consult tenants on certain decisions. In these instances, tenants play a more active role in working with their housing provider to deliver services, make decisions, or change policies. In these scenarios, tenants are often selected by the housing provider for these roles based on their lived experience and proximity to their peers. The main distinction in this category is that tenants have greater influence and involvement with their own governance, but do not have the power to make decisions independently from their housing provider.

**Control** refers to groups or events where tenants have the power to influence governance structures and decisions entirely separate from their housing provider. This can include tenant committees/associations, tenant budgets, or tenant unions. Tenant committees and tenant budgets can be formed inside or outside of existing governance structures, both in partnership with housing provider or independent from them. The main distinction in this category is that tenants can act and make organizational decisions independent from their housing provider.

Tenants and housing providers will approach tenant governance differently based on their needs, past experiences, and goals. Some may see ideas farther along on the continuum and see them as going too far, while others may see it as not going far enough for tenant governance. The point of the continuum is not to tell communities how they should be governed, but to think about how they are being governed and decide if any of the three categories would work best for their housing context. Tenant governance is not any singular idea or action, but a progression of events leading towards the empowerment of tenants.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## How to Bring About Tenant Governance?

Much of the literature around tenant governance spoke to the role of negotiation in this process. As tenants and housing providers work to form their vision and plan for implementing tenant governance there will be ongoing negotiations both internally and externally. This occurs within groups, such as between tenants or inside non-profit organizations, and between these groups as they discuss goals or demands. This can be a challenging as tenants and housing providers navigate conversations that they may not have had before. The following is a list of factors that can support groups in these negotiating processes:

- **Willingness to change:** If there is a shared willingness to change among all parties involved, such as among tenants and a housing provider, it is easier to work together and implement changes (Together with Tenants, 2020).
- **Strong leadership:** Much of this work around tenant governance involves extensive community organizing over long periods of time, which is why consistent and strong leadership among all organizing groups is a key to success (Preece, 2019).
- **Clear communication:** Successful negotiations rely on groups being able to communicate clearly with each other. This is true for planning within groups and between groups. For efforts to increase tenant governance, it is recommended that groups are clear about what they want and how they plan to achieve this (McCollum, 2008).
- **Partnerships:** While partnerships are not always necessary for success, they can allow groups to achieve their goals quicker. Partnerships can allow groups to share resources, learn from each other, and work more efficiently.

The four factors listed above can aid tenants and housing providers in their negotiation towards increased tenant governance, but the process for achieving this can be slow. It is important for groups to prepare for a long journey that may not yield immediate results. One step of this process that cannot be rushed is building trust. Often trust can only be built over time, as different groups are able to show authenticity and commitment to their partnership. It also takes time for communities to build the capacity needed for certain change. For example, housing providers or tenants may need time to onboard new members to the group. A tenant committee may need time to learn how to operate and work cohesively. All of these are parts of the process that may seem tedious, but ultimately they are required to build strong foundations for lasting change.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## How to Bring About Tenant Governance?

When tenants and housing providers do find success in working towards their goals, it is also important to recognize these achievements. One recommendation that emerged from the research is to reward all involved groups for their efforts and achievements towards tenant governance. This could be for tenants or housing providers alike. Awards have the double benefit of boosting morale and spreading awareness about successful tenant governance initiatives. Another helpful idea is to establish ways to quantify and track progress on different initiatives. For example, groups can keep track of how many tenants have been involved with governance initiatives, or how satisfied tenants are with a certain program. This can be helpful data for recognizing the impact of a program, or for identifying areas in need of improvement.

Finally, several tools were identified as ways to help tenants and housing providers work together on tenant governance initiatives. Some groups have found success in in-person canvassing to engage with community members. Other events such as town hall meetings, info sessions, or webinars, can be used to share or collect information more widely. Some communities have also utilized technology to support their organizing efforts. This can include apps, websites, or social media platforms to engage with groups in a different way that works best for them.



# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Barriers to Tenant Governance?

As communities begin working towards increasing tenant governance, they may face barriers along the way. These barriers can be practical, related to time and resources, and ideological, related to conflicting worldviews or goals. The following sections will explore some of the different barriers for tenants and housing providers that came up in the literature review.

One of the main ideological barriers is a difference in expectations or goals for increasing tenant governance (McCollum, 2008; Nettling, 2020; Preece, 2019). It can be difficult to move in a uniform direction when organizing a large group of people in any community, because each group member may have different priorities that they are working towards. This challenge can then increase when two or more groups are trying to negotiate with each other, such as between tenants and their housing provider. To try and alleviate these challenges, it is recommended that groups try to establish collective goals early on and be clear about communicating these goals to everyone involved.

Another common ideological barrier to increasing tenant governance is an unwillingness among housing providers to de-centralise power or re-distribute power to tenants (Taylor, 2017). Housing providers might be wary about changing or giving up the amount of control they have over their housing stock. Housing is a large asset to be managed, and all private, non-profit, and civic housing operators need to ensure the safety of their tenants and long-term financial sustainability as a housing provider. Implementing any significant change in operations or control could pose as a threat to the housing provider, which is why they may be resistant to efforts for increasing tenant governance. Housing providers being wary of change or even resistant to it should not deter tenants from continuing their work for increasing tenant governance. However, it is important to acknowledge the concerns that a housing provider may have in this process. If tenants want to try and partner with their housing provider in tenant governance initiatives, tenants will need to address these concerns in order to gain their housing provider's support.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Barriers to Tenant Governance?

Top-down decision-making structures can be another barrier for tenant governance initiatives in housing. In any organization, the process for making decisions is an important indicator of governance and power. These decision-making mechanisms can include a majority vote on a board, or an independent decision made by one individual. Describing these mechanisms as being “top-down” highlights the fact that decisions are made by those at the top of an organization’s leadership. Often these mechanisms are created for consistency and to ensure that the housing provider’s best interests are prioritized. However, top-down decision-making structures can be a barrier to tenant governance because tenants are often the furthest from the top, and therefore furthest from this power (Hickman and Preece, 2019). It can be difficult for tenants to bridge this gap between themselves and the decision-makers.

Low-income tenants may face significant barriers in their personal lives that can affect their ability to be involved with governance projects. Tenants may need support with childcare, language translation, and transportation. They may not be able to be involved due to work schedules, other community commitments, or health concerns. For low-income tenants who may be facing these challenges, joining a tenant group could require time or resources that they do not have. This is certainly not a reason to deter tenant governance initiatives, but instead it should inform group leaders who want to ensure that their tenant governance programs are accessible to a wide range of needs.

One final barrier that can affect tenant governance initiatives is conflicts arising between involved parties. As tenants or housing providers are building towards achieving tenant governance, tensions can build throughout this process that strain relationships and jeopardize partnerships (Hansen & Langergaard, 2017). For example, in the case of a successful negotiation for new forms of tenant governance with a housing provider, conflict can arise within tenant groups as new governing positions are created. Not all tenants may like the new positions that other tenants are put into, because they dislike the amount of trust they are putting into their peers (Bradley, 2008). Other tenants may not be satisfied with the agreement that was reached with their housing provider. Conflicts such as these can jeopardize long-term agreements with a housing provider because they may be seen as a failure to achieve tenant governance. In the case of any internal conflicts, tenant groups will be able to address them independently, but it is important to know that these conflicts are normal and expected.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Special Considerations

As has been explained, increasing tenant governance in housing can be a complicated process for tenants, advocates, housing providers, and municipalities to go through. There are risks and barriers to be aware of, all of which should be given special consideration throughout this process. The following points came up repeatedly in the literature reviewed for this project, and were included to enhance this discussion around increasing tenant governance.

One of the first challenges that communities often grapple with around tenant governance has to do with the governance structures they are working within (McCollum, 2008; Mullins & Shanks, 2017). Depending on the level of involvement that a housing provider may have in working with tenants towards tenant governance, tenants may be skeptical of forming a new governance structure within the old structure. Even if tenants are more involved, if the governance system looks the same then it may not be true tenant governance. This concern of recreating the same systems of governance brings a more critical lens to the conversation around tenant governance and inspires further innovation for alternative housing governance models.

This report has concluded that tenant governance can fall on a continuum of increasing tenant involvement that ranges from no governance to partial governance, to full governance. While this conclusion is in line with findings from the literature review (Preece, 2019), some tenants may not agree with it. One common sentiment is that there cannot be 'partial' governance, and that tenants either have governing power or they do not. It is important for tenants to come to their own conclusions on this topic of partial governance when determining what their vision for tenant governance is.

Most of the issues and ideas around tenant governance in housing relate to other social struggles. Increasing democratic participation is a larger theme that many communities are currently exploring in response to widespread critique of different service sectors. Sectors such as healthcare, community safety, community engagement, and social planning are all being examined in a similar way (Pawson et al., 2012). In light of these similar movements for increasing democracy, the conversation around tenant participation within the housing sector could influence and be influenced by these other social movements.

## CASE STUDIES

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### Case Study #1: The Together with Tenants (TwT) Plan and Charter United Kingdom

In 2017, a fire in the Grenfell Tower residential building in London resulted in 72 tenant deaths. In the wake of this tragedy, investigations found that this fire occurred due to a number of neglected maintenance needs. In response, tenants called for a drastic review of management and operations for social housing throughout the United Kingdom. These calls to action resulted in a sector-wide initiative that focused on strengthening relationships between tenants and social housing providers. As a result, a large-scale review of social housing took place that encouraged housing providers to explore their organisational charters to find ways to make boards and organizations more accountable to tenants. The culmination of this work resulted in the creation of the National Housing Federation's (NHF) Together with Tenants Plan and Charter (2019).



The NHF's Together with Tenants Plan outlines a four point plan that includes the Together with Tenant (TwT) Charter, along with further commitments from the NHF to strengthen tenant accountability, tenant oversight, and tenant voices. Housing providers were then invited to adopt the TwT Charter as a way to show their commitment to supporting tenants and remaining accountable to them. The TwT Charter is meant to act as a guide for tenants and housing providers working to strengthen their partnerships. While the implementation of the TwT Charter is still very recent, the results from its early adopters have been overwhelmingly positive. Housing providers who were invited to test the Charter early on found it to be a helpful resource for starting conversations about ways to support tenant voices and oversight. The early Charter adopters were also encouraged to edit the Charter to input language and ideas that better suited their housing community. These conversations led to changes as organizations implemented Tenant Advisory Panels, established board seats for tenants, created new mechanisms for tenant input, and conducted forums and campaigns to raise awareness among tenants.

## CASE STUDIES

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### Case Study #1: The Together with Tenants (TwT) Plan and Charter United Kingdom

With this early success of the TwT Charter, the NHF is now moving forward to invite all housing associations across the sector to adopt the TwT Charter. They hope that by sharing success stories and experiences, more tenants and housing providers will commit to the Charter and be able to foster healthier and happier communities. The NHF recognizes the challenges that communities may face in the implementation process, but they are committed to supporting groups in this process. The NHF believes that this process is more about simply getting housing providers to comply with the Charter, it is about “organisations developing a culture and an intent to build strong and trusting relationships with residents” (Together with Tenants, 2020).

The NHF’s TwT Plan and Charter demonstrate one way that different levels of government can support efforts for tenant involvement with housing governance. While the TwT is still mainly supporting tenant feedback and oversight, this may not be the form of true control that tenant governance seeks to employ. Therefore, the TwT has started several tenant governance initiatives that fall within the Participation and Partnership levels of the Tenant Governance Continuum. However, these engagement efforts can serve as the first steps in building partnerships between tenants and housing providers that can lead to greater tenant control. In the case of the TwT Charter, it is difficult to know how tenants or the NHF can hold providers accountable if they fail to uphold certain commitments in the Charter. While this decision may have been intentional by the NHF to try and make the Charter more attractive to housing providers, it may make it difficult for tenants who want accountability. As a way to ensure greater accountability from housing providers, tenants could build certain agreements into the charter themselves to ensure that all parties can be held accountable when needed.



Photo credit: UKCO, 2019

## CASE STUDIES

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### **Case Study #2: The Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) and the Tenants First Program Toronto, Canada**

The Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is the second largest housing provider in North America. The TCHC owns and operates over 160,000 tenants in more than 58,000 housing units in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In 2001, the TCHC created a new system of governance called the Tenant Participation System (TPS). The TPS was created in response to tenants and community advocates calling for greater accountability from the TCHC towards its tenants. After the City of Toronto mandated the TCHC to respond to these calls for greater tenant involvement, the TCHC conducted research for their tenant engagement strategy over the course of one year, collecting input from tenants during this time. The result of the research was the implementation of the TPS.

The TPS created a range of avenues for tenants to be involved with the direct and indirect operations of the TCHC. One change involved the formation of tenant councils, an elected body of tenants working directly with managers from the TCHC. The TPS also created several seats for tenants on the TCHC Board of Directors to bring more tenant input to organizational leadership and decision-making. Another initiative brought on by the TPS was the creation of a tenant-controlled budget. This budget gave over \$1 million to each regional group within the TCHC to be used for purposes that tenants decided on. Finally, the TPS created several outlets for tenants to provide feedback to their housing providers on a regular basis. These included utilizing tenant surveys and regular community forums.



Photo credit: Richard Agecutay/CBC, 2019

## CASE STUDIES

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### **Case Study #2: The Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) and the Tenants First Program Toronto, Canada**

In 2016, the TCHC proposed and approved the Tenants First (TF) Implementation Plan. These changes were brought on by continued feedback from tenants calling for the previously established TPS to be reviewed and updated. The 2016 TF Plan set some major goals for the TCHC that included de-centralising operations to local non-profits, building revitalizations, changing management models and embracing more tenant feedback (CoT, 2016). The TF plan sought to increase efforts to engage with tenants on three different levels: the building, the community, and the City, largely by expanding on the previous measures that the TPS had put in place. This included increased Tenant Advisory Committees and further outlets for providing feedback to housing managers. The TCHC and the TF plan demonstrated a clear interest to prioritize tenants' needs in their operations, but they continue to receive criticism for a failure to meet their commitments to tenants.

In conclusion, the TCHC and the Tenants First Implementation Plan stands as a strong example for housing providers looking to engage with their tenants and create new opportunities in leadership for them. The TCHC responded to community feedback and initiated change at all levels of their organisation. This created new channels for tenants to provide feedback and influence certain organisational decisions. Therefore, the TCHC has implemented a range of options across the Tenant Governance Continuum. However, most of the initiatives from the TPS and the TF plan still keep tenants mainly as participants and partners, thus maintaining the TCHC as the sole provider and tenants as the recipients. Working towards greater tenant governance with the TF plan would require the TCHC to allow more space for tenants to choose the roles they can hold and to dramatically shift decision-making powers to the tenants.

## CASE STUDIES

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### Case Study #3: The Downtown Eastside (DTES) Single Room Occupancy Collaborative (SRO-C) Vancouver, Canada

The Downtown Eastside (DTES) SRO Collaborative (SRO-C) is a tenant advocacy group formed in 2015 to organize tenants living in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotels in Vancouver. SROs are typically small, single-room living units run by a range of both private and non-profit housing providers and are often treated as a last-resort before homelessness (CoV, 2020). SROs are notoriously difficult to manage and maintain, and therefore many of the tenants living in these units experience a whole host of unsafe and undesirable living conditions.

After its formation, the SRO-C worked to form tenant committees and repair programs in five privately-owned SRO hotels in Vancouver. These committees were able to successfully negotiate major building improvements and the eventual relocation to better SRO buildings. Since then, the SRO-C has grown to support more tenants in more hotels, and has expanded their focus to overdose prevention, academic research, and political advocacy.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Vancouver in 2020, members of the SRO-C stepped up to support tenants throughout the DTES. With support from the federally funded Community Housing Transformation Centre (CHTC) and the Community Based Tenant Initiative Fund (CBTIF), the SRO-C applied for and received funding to start pilot programs in seven privately owned SRO hotels in the DTES. The proposed project aimed to “improve living conditions and tenant engagement, promote building rehabilitation, and stabilize rents” (CHTC, 2021).



Photo credit: CHTC, 2021

## CASE STUDIES

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### **Case Study #3: The Downtown Eastside (DTES) Single Room Occupancy Collaborative (SRO-C) Vancouver, Canada**

The SRO-C began these programs with a tenant-centred approach by entering into a building and asking tenants about their needs. This approach empowered tenants to be heard and invited them to be involved with these initiatives from the start. The SRO-C aimed to build trust and responsibility amongst tenants in these buildings. At the same time, members of the SRO-C also approached the housing providers of these buildings in an effort to build more partnerships that would strengthen these programs. The SRO-C started regular meal services and a building repair program that were both run by tenants. In the end, members of the SRO-C found that these programs benefited both tenants and housing providers alike, and allowed them to build trust with both parties to advance their goals within each building. The SRO-C has also built extensive partnerships with other local organizations to support overdose prevention initiatives within these buildings. This has resulted in 54% of tenants being educated and trained in various overdose prevention or reversal skills to date (Pederson, 2021).

By bringing a holistic and tenant-centred approach to their work around food security, building repairs and cleaning, overdose prevention, and community education, the SRO-C has supported strong groups of empowered tenants. This has helped the SRO-C advance their long-term goals to form tenant committees, community coalitions, and new pathways for tenant involvement in building decisions. These are the steps that the SRO-C is taking in their goal to form housing environments that are truly operated by tenants, which would place most of these initiatives on the Partnership and Control levels of the Tenant Governance Continuum.

# REVIEW OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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To further explore this topic of tenant governance in housing, a series of stakeholder interviews were conducted for this project. In the end, fourteen semi-structured interviews were held with a range of community stakeholders representing tenant advocacy groups, housing researchers, non-profit housing operators, civic non-market housing planning and operations staff. While each stakeholder was able to speak to their individual experiences with tenant governance, many did not speak for their entire organizations. Therefore, all interviews were kept anonymous, as this project only aimed to identify common themes and experiences. The following sections highlight some of the main findings from the stakeholder interviews that support and expand on initial findings from the literature review.

## 1. Support for Tenant Governance

One of the main themes that came up in each interview was a general positivity toward increasing tenant involvement in housing governance. Between tenant advocates non-profit representatives, and civic staff, all interviewees saw tenant governance as a common goal. This goal reflects shared community ideals for improving living conditions for low-income tenants and supporting communities. While there was plenty of support for tenant governance among community stakeholders, there was less agreement on what this truly means for communities.

## 2. Varied understandings of Tenant Governance

Another finding from the stakeholder interviews was a range of understandings for tenant governance. As mentioned previously, there is a recorded history of different terms that have been leading towards tenant governance; such as tenant engagement, tenant participation, and resident democracy (Bengtsson, 1998; Hansen & Langergaard, 2017; Mullins & Shanks, 2017; McCollum, 2008; Pawson & Munro, 2010). While these terms are not interchangeable, they do share the common goal of including tenant voices in decision-making structures for housing operations. Similarly, the housing providers interviewed for this report mainly spoke about tenant governance from the approach of partnership and engagement such as through community meetings, increased feedback loops, and peer-support programs. Tenant advocates however had a slightly different vision for tenant governance. Tenant advocates talked about tenant governance in terms of obtaining power and giving tenants more autonomy within their communities. The advocates did believe that partnership and engagement were part of the process for tenant governance, but expressed that partnerships and engagement efforts are only performative if they did not give real control to tenants.

# REVIEW OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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## 3. Acknowledging the Challenges

The housing providers who were interviewed for this project all expressed that they are working hard to support tenants and deliver strong services in light of severe challenges. Many housing providers face capacity challenges in both funding and staffing, so it can be intimidating to then implement changes to the way they operate their buildings. The housing providers interviewed shared that communal safety is a driving factor behind many of their building policies, such as for policies around guests or wellness checks. While these representatives acknowledged that these policies are not perfect, the policies have been created to try and keep their tenants as safe as possible. As a result, these housing providers are reluctant to change some of their policies for fear of creating new risks.

Housing providers and tenant advocates alike spoke to the challenges and barriers that low-income tenants in particular experience. Tenants may face challenges related to accessing services, meeting basic living needs, maintaining good health, and sustaining an income. While all interviewees recognized the tremendous challenges that tenants faced, certain groups discussed them differently. For example, the tenant advocates interviewed felt that because of the challenges listed above, low-income tenants have the motivation and skills to be more involved with governance in housing. Therefore, tenant governance was seen as a way to serve tenants. In comparison, the housing providers interviewed tended to see the challenges that tenants face as separate needs to be prioritized and met before thinking about tenant governance.

## 4. The Question of Capacity

Another theme that came up during the stakeholder interviews was around the question of capacity. Most of the housing providers who were interviewed reported that tenants often do not have time or capacity to take on certain governance responsibilities. Based on their experiences, these providers believed that tenants usually have bigger day-to-day priorities to focus on such as their mental and physical health, income, family, or other roles they may already fill. In comparison, the tenant advocates interviewed felt that tenants have greater capacity for involvement than housing providers tend to believe. These advocates reported that some tenants want to be so involved that the tenant advocacy groups often run out of opportunities for them. It is important for housing providers to not assume what capacity their tenants have, but to ask tenants. Starting this conversation between tenants and housing providers can help all parties better understand their starting place in this work for tenant governance.

# REVIEW OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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## 5. Acknowledging the Risks

When discussing opportunities for increasing tenant governance, most interviews with housing providers tended to shift towards the potential risks involved. Housing providers explained that they are constantly seeking to minimize risks, which is a motivation that underlies most of their governance structures. One representative, specifically from a non-profit housing provider, explained that most non-profit providers must do this because they have so much to lose. If any negative event occurs, the organization could lose community trust, support, and even funding. Housing providers must consider whether the tenant governance efforts they introduce will open up their organization's structure and reputation to new risks.

For some housing providers, the idea of increased tenant governance raises more questions and uncertainty than solutions. One question that arose numerous times was about building security. Housing providers explained that security guards, cameras, and guest policies are put in place to keep both tenants and neighbours safe. Yet to some tenants, these security features may feel more prohibitive for them. Policies that create new restrictions can have a degrading effect on tenants, even if the policies are intended to keep the tenants safe. Housing providers are keenly aware of this issue, and those interviewed had acknowledged that their building security policies did have flaws. This speaks to another underlying tension for many housing providers. This tension is that housing providers are doing what they feel is best to minimize risks and keep people safe, but in doing so this can limit the autonomy that tenants have over their homes.

## 6. Importance of Context

Understanding context is necessary when identifying the needs and priorities of a community. While this report focuses on tenants of low-income housing, the reality is that much variation exists between the type of housing, tenant base, housing provider, location, and wider geopolitical context. For example, some of the non-profit housing providers who were interviewed for this project explained that their buildings primarily housing women and children will have different needs than buildings primarily housing seniors or persons with physical disabilities. Social and supportive housing for low-income residents also look differently between countries. This was demonstrated by Mullins, Shanks & Sacranie (2017) in their case study on housing governance models found in Austria, the Netherlands, and the UK. This variance makes it challenging to explore common pathways to increasing tenant governance in housing, because the context of the housing is so important. This is why housing providers and tenant advocates all emphasized the importance of tailoring tenant governance programs specifically to the housing setting.

# REVIEW OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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## 7. Accounting for Past and Present Efforts

Every community stakeholder who was interviewed was able to speak to some level of experience with increasing tenant governance. Some of the housing providers shared their experiences with tenant committees that ran social programs in various housing settings. In some settings these social programs led to more involved tenant committees in each building. In other settings though, these social programs eventually disbanded due to a lack of interest among the tenants taking part in them. These examples demonstrate how tenant governance initiatives can lead to other opportunities if they are successful, or they can halt future possibilities if seen as a failure. Depending on what has been attempted in the past and whether it is seen as a success or a failure, the results of these initiatives for tenant governance will be used as a measurement for what could be possible in the future.

There are plenty of examples of successful tenant governance initiatives that have happened globally and locally. The previous case studies in this report highlight some examples of programs initiated by tenants, advocates, housing providers, and municipalities that reshaped housing systems to begin working towards varying degrees of tenant governance. It is important to be aware of these examples because communities can learn from each other and build off previous success.

## 8. Factors for Change

Each interviewee identified factors necessary for increasing tenant governance. The three most common factors shared were: a willingness to change, transparency, and partnerships.

### **Willingness to change**

Much like the findings from the literature review on tenant governance, many stakeholders agreed that tenant groups and housing providers cannot change unless they are ready to (Together with Tenants, 2020). For example, tenant advocates explained how much easier it was to work with housing providers that were open to feedback about changing services. While tenant groups have certainly found success even when housing providers are resistant to change, more can be done when housing providers are willing to support efforts for tenant governance.

# REVIEW OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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## **Transparency**

Following a similar line of thought to Preece (2019), the stakeholders interviewed found that transparency is another necessary factor for increasing tenant governance. Transparency is needed for building trusting relationships and is important in negotiation situations between tenants and housing providers. For example, some tenant advocates explained that it is best for housing providers to be forthright about what they can and cannot change, as opposed to making promises that cannot be fulfilled later. This is similar for creating tenant committees or involving tenants on governance boards. If tenants clearly understand the parameters for their level of influence, then they will better understand the capabilities of their involvement. This transparency will help set up tenants for success.

## **Partnerships**

The last main factor identified is the importance of building strong partnerships within communities. Every successful example of implementing tenant governance is the result of a partnership that had been built over time. This was seen throughout case studies in the literature, as well as by advocates and housing providers in Vancouver. The main takeaway is that change requires community members working together to create new visions and solutions that meet their needs.

## 9. The Tenant Governance Continuum

Each of the interviews with community stakeholders provided different angles for understanding what increased tenant involvement with housing governance can look like. Several interviewees referred to tenant governance as happening on a spectrum, which matched initial findings from the literature review (Hickman & Preece, 2019; IAP2, 2021). This input went on to inform the creation of the Tenant Governance Continuum (Table 2) which was developed for this report. Actions will differ in size and scope, but all fall on the same continuum. It then falls on tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments to explore this range of governance options and determine what they want to work towards.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been developed based on the findings of the literature review, case studies, and stakeholder interviews for this report. These recommendations are for tenants, advocates, housing providers, and municipalities alike, as there is no uniform route for any group working towards tenant governance. The following recommendations provide a range of possibilities for these previously mentioned groups, and can be tailored to their individual needs. These recommendations also include Quick Action ideas for starting tenant governance efforts specifically in the context of Vancouver.

**Legend**

- Participation
- Partnership
- Control

Recommendation	Description	Initiator	Quick Start Actions
<b>Collective Feedback</b>	Collecting tenant feedback on a large scale to identify shared tenant experiences and provide direction for their housing provider's response. These efforts are often the first step in creating change. Awareness may increase as issues are raised by more tenants.	Tenants Advocacy Groups Housing Providers	Developing channels for regular feedback (e.g. comment boxes placed in buildings, on-line or in-person surveys, etc.) and ensuring that those who develop the feedback channels are held accountable for responding to the feedback. This could happen through building meetings, tenant committees, or building-wide votes."
<b>Internal Assessments</b>	Housing providers completing internal assessments of their existing governance structures. Internal assessments can be a way to critically examine the governance structures in place and explore options or opportunities for tenant involvement.	Housing Providers Local Governments	BC Housing can develop survey questions specific to tenant involvement and governance when administering tenant surveys in the social or supportive housing buildings they own and manage.
<b>Review of the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA)</b>	As the primary set of provincial laws for tenants, the RTA could be expanded to create stronger protections for tenants and support tenant governance initiatives. It is recommended that a formal review take place with involvement from low-income tenants.	Tenants Housing Providers Advocacy Groups Provincial Government	Provincial Government can review the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) through a formal review process in consultation with tenants and municipalities.
<b>Further Research on Tenant Governance</b>	Additional research to help tenants, advocates, housing providers, and municipalities expand their understanding of tenant governance and create plans for implementing change. It is recommended that this work be tenant-led or tenant-focused to ensure that tenant interests are prioritized.	Tenants Housing Providers Advocacy Groups Local Governments Provincial Government	BC Housing, the City of Vancouver, and/or other housing research groups can develop and coordinate additional research in collaboration with tenants.
<b>Third-Party Advocates</b>	Seeking support from a third-party advocate to help facilitate tenant negotiations on an individual and collective scale. Often the presence of a third-party representative can alleviate tensions and advance discussions in a negotiating setting.	Tenants Housing Providers Advocacy Groups	Potential topics: policy recommendations that support tenant governance on a municipal level, innovative tenant governance pilot programs, or a comparative study on tenant participation in other fields such as healthcare, community safety, or social planning.

Table 3. Recommendations

# RECOMMENDATIONS

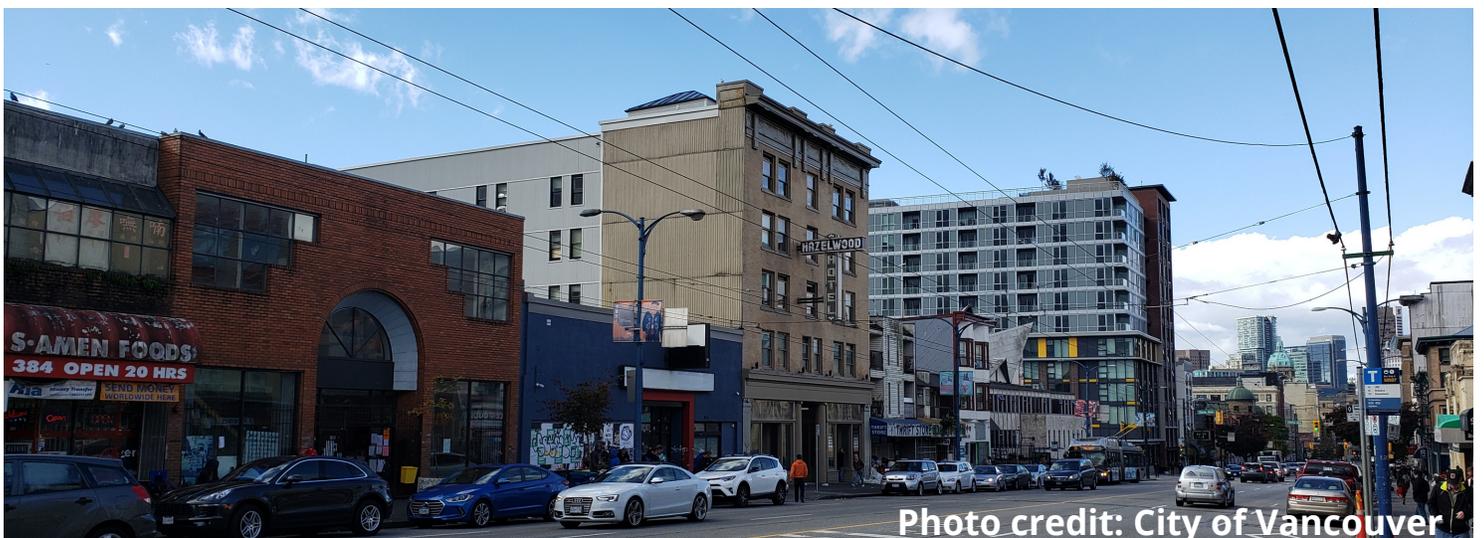
Recommendation	Description	Initiator	Quick Start Actions
<b>Fostering Partnerships</b>	Creating space for tenants, housing providers, and other interested parties to gather for exchanging information and mutual learning. Bringing groups together through various events or channels can be a way to foster innovation for increasing tenant governance.	Tenants Housing Providers Advocacy Groups Local Governments Provincial Government	Organize community events, workshops, and networking opportunities around this topic for various partners and stakeholders to participate in together.
<b>Mandating Tenant Committees or Board Involvement</b>	Creating tenant-led committees or encouraging tenant involvement on governing boards as a direct pathway for tenant governance. Housing providers who do not already have tenant-centered committees or boards in place should examine their governance structures to make space for this.	Tenants Housing Providers Advocacy Groups Provincial Government	BC Housing can look to change the non-profit operator agreements that exist within their housing stock in Vancouver, to include the need for tenant-led committees or boards.  Non-profit Housing Operators can seek out funding or training opportunities for training tenants in board facilitation.
<b>Further Research for Alternative Housing Governance Models</b>	Further research into housing models that utilize alternative governance systems for housing providers to consider. Looking beyond traditional tenant and housing provider dynamics and considering models that place a larger focus on culture, tradition, or community.	Tenants Housing Providers Advocacy Groups Local Governments Provincial Government	Some alternative models to explore include: Co-op housing models or Community Land Trusts (CLTs)
<b>Supporting Tenants in Funding Applications</b>	Seeking out grants or other funding opportunities that can initiate potential tenant governance projects. Providing time or technical resources to tenants and advocacy groups could ensure successful applications and set up tenant groups for success.	Housing Providers Advocacy Groups Local Governments	
<b>Grant Programs</b>	Funding opportunities developed by civic entities or housing providers that encourage tenant-led initiatives around tenant governance.	Housing Providers Local Governments	City of Vancouver can perform a review of existing community and social service grants and rewards for non-profit organizations or members of the public, to encourage tenant-led initiatives around tenant governance.
<b>Separating Governance from Rental Payments and Evictions</b>	Tenant governance must be separate from the governing body that collects rent or has the power to evict tenants. Finding ways to divert these powers away from housing providers can realign one of the main power imbalances between tenants and their housing provider.	Tenants Advocacy Groups Local Governments	

## CONCLUSION

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Increasing tenant involvement in housing governance is no simple task, but it is necessary. Every tenant deserves to have agency over their lived environment, but unfortunately this agency is often restricted for tenants in low-income housing settings. These restrictions can include building policies around guests or security, program operations that feel intrusive, such as wellness checks, or even larger organizational committees that make decisions without tenants that ultimately affect tenants the most. These examples showcase some of the systems that housing providers have created to govern low-income tenants. While these systems of governance are often created with the intention of keeping tenants safe and ensuring financial sustainability, they can create problems that tenants fall victim to. As tenants have worked to voice their concerns about stringent policies and undesirable living conditions, they have also imagined new ways to be involved in the systems that govern themselves and their neighbours. The results of these efforts for increasing tenant governance should encourage other tenants, housing providers, and municipalities to continue to support this work.

This report reviewed past and present ideas and innovations for increasing tenant governance in low-income housing settings to help guide tenants, advocates, housing providers, and governments. Through exploring global and local efforts, this report found that working towards tenant governance can involve a range of activities that fall along a continuum. This continuum begins with activities where tenants are participants in governance, and leads towards creating systems where tenants have genuine control over their living environment. While there are some well-established goals for tenant governance, it is important to remember that no housing environment is the same. As the needs and motivations for tenants and housing providers vary, it is up to every group to determine their own goals for themselves. Then once a direction has been set, all groups may begin to organize and form the partnerships necessary to change their environment. This process can be slow, but in the end there is the potential to form healthier and more supportive communities.



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